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ABSTRACT

Unlike less skilled writers, who are intensely writer-oriented, skilled writers of personal essays and autobiographies are reader-oriented and demonstrate a conscious concern for their external audience. Student writers can develop a sense of an external audience by analyzing parallel autobiographical text selections of skilled and unskilled writers. They can contrast "The Diary of Isaac Dodd" with Mark Twain's more skillful "Autobiography" to learn about authorial perspective. A comparison of Isaac Dodd with Natalie Crouter's "Forbidden Diary: A Record of Wartime Internment, 1941-45" will demonstrate the principles of ordering events and proportioning for emphasis. Contrasting "Diary of the Michigan Farmer's Wife" with Mark Twain can help students learn how the author's additional interpretation of events is often necessary to make the material more understandable to an unfamiliar audience. Finally, a comparison of "Wishes are Horses: Montgomery, Alabama's First Lady of the Violin" by novice writer Fanny Marks Seibels, with Maxine Hong Kingston's "The Women Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts" will show how skilled writers present numerous, varied, individualized, and complex personae. Such examinations will enable student writers to ask such questions as (1) Who will read this? (2) What will they find interesting or significant? (3) What should be supplied or eliminated to emphasize the interesting or significant? (4) Does the organization reflect the intended emphasis? and (5) How much overt interpretation is needed? (HTH)

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Autobiography and Audience

by

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"I write for myself and strangers," said Gertrude Stein, making explicit the principle that guides the writing of most skilled authors, professional and otherwise. In contrast, "I write for myself alone" or "I write for myself and intimates" appears to guide the composition of many students and other less skilled writers, as an examination of their texts reveals. Students who learn how to make this accommodation are embarked on the road to professionalism.

Skilled writers of personal essays, autobiographies, and even some letters, demonstrate a conscious concern for their external audience because they recognize that the audience is likely not to know about them personally, and perhaps not much about their world. Such writers are, in the terminology of Linda Flower ,1 reader-oriented. To accommodate their audience, these skilled autobiographers supply sufficient information and interpret the relevant contexts and details of their lives to enable readers, Stein's audience of "strangers," to understand the prose for themselves. This paper will demonstrate how skilled writers control the authorial perspective and persona, the arrangement, proportioning,

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emphasis and interpretation of material as accommodations to an external audience, while less skilled writers are more likely to leave these matters to chance or to neglect them entirely. It will also show how student writers can learn these professional concerns and techniques.

In contrast, the works of less skilled writers are intensely writer-oriented. The authorial persona that emerges from the text is likely to be uncontrolled, at considerable variance from the persona the author imagines he or she is presenting. The available materials, or the author's whims rather than artistic considerations, are likely to determine the arrangement, proportioning, and emphasis of the work. The resulting text may be extremely private, excluding most readers. Or else it is self-indulgent, including trivia, repetition, or peripheral matters accetable only to readers tolerant of the banal and the narcissistic--perhaps the author's relatives, for whom such details assume urique but highly personal significance.

An effective way to help students develop a sense of an external audience, of moving them from writer-orientation to reader-orientation, is to have them analyze parallel texts, selections from the autobiographical writings of skilled and unskilled writers, published and unpublished. Through examining

the differences between authorial perspective and persona, interpretation, arrangement, proportioning, and emphasis, students can address such concerns as: What is the significance of the life or events that I'm reading about? How can I tell? Why is one text or a particular authorial persona, more interesting (or more boring) than the other? Why would I (or anyone else unfamiliar with the subject) want to read more about the subject--or to avoid it? What do readers, including myself, need to know that the writers have (or have not) supplied? And, finally, how can I apply what I have learned to my own writing?

The following materials enable excellent analytic comparisons, and provoke lively discussions, though many alternatives are available--from historical societies, local or family archives, or from the students themselves. Bibliographies such as those by Kaplan 2 and Briscoe 3 reveal a wealth of published works. " The Diary of Isaac Dodd" (unpublished) and Mark Twain's Autobiography 4 both deal, in part, with explorations of rural and small town America of bygone days. "The Dairy of a Michigan Farmer's Wife" (unpublished) and Natalie Crouter's Forbidden Diary: A Record of Wartime Internment, 1941-45, ed. Lynn Z. Bloom, American Women's Diary Series (New York: Burt Franklin, 1980) are day-by-day accounts of the minutiae of everyday family and

community life, written by fortyish wives and mothers. One lived on a farm in Michigan; the other, however, along with her family and five hundred other Americans, was a prisoner of war in a Japanese internment camp in the Philippines. Fanny Marks Siebels's vanity press Wishes Are Horses: Montgomery, Alabama's First Lady of the Violin (New York: Exposition Press, 1958) focuses on the author's childhood and increasing maturation as a young woman, as does Maxine Hong Kingston's award-winning The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts (1975; rp. New York: Vintage Books, 1977)--but with significant differences, literal and metaphorical.

Authorial perspective. Skilled writers, professional or otherwise, are able to look at their emerging texts from the intended readers' point(s) of view as well as their own. This imaginative perspective enables them to determine:

(1) What information or background material they need to provide to enable the reader to understand the text.

(2) What interpretations of this material they need to furnish to control the reader's responses, or at least to encourage him or her to understand the author's point of view.

(3) What they should omit from their final text that the reader will find uninteresting, trivial, peripheral, obvious, or irrelevant, irrespective of their own devotion to such material.

A naive writer, such as Isaac Dodd, lacks this perspective. His account of July 4, 1903, begins:

> Hurrah for the 127th annaversary [sic] of National Independence. Hot as fury and not a bit of rain to mar the happiness of anyone. I spent the glorious fourth this year the best I ever did in my life. I had a good time and a splendid ride and saw lots of sights more than I could remember. I woke up at 6 a.m. at Number 719 Lehigh Ave., Sayre, Pa. I ate breakfast and visited awhile. Then Brown had orders to take a fast freight to Suspension Bridge 205 miles. So he told me to get ready and go along and after some persuading I consented to go. So I donned a pair of overalls and a frock and an old cap, put on a bold front, picked up an 8 x 12 dinnar and went over on the RR track and mounted the Cab of Locomotive No. 753 and away we started about 7:45 a.m. We rode along at a good rate of speed with 25 loaded cars behind us and I hadent [sic] been on long before I began to enjoy myself. Some of the stations we went past are as follows. East Waverly, Lockwood, Van Etten, Cayuta, Odessa, Burdett, Lodi, Ovid, Kendaia, Geneva, Clifton Springs and Manchester the end of one division. . . . We went past Farmington,

Victor, Fisher, Mendon, Rush, Rochester Junction, Caledonia, Le Roy, Stafford, Batavia, Corfu and Depew.

Dodd's account, typical of those of many diarists (though not, I would contend, of the best), is strictly for himself. He knows who Brown is, and why he himself is at "719 Lehigh Ave., Sayre, Pa."; an external audience does not. Is Brown a friend? relative? someone else? Is this Dodd's customary abode? Is he on a vacation? Perhaps, since he appears to be recording the names of towns unfamiliar to him. Because he provides no interpretation of this list of names, it is impossible to determine what significance he attaches to them, except as an itemization of places he "went past." When children begin learning to write, explains Donald Graves in "Blocking and the Young Writer," 5, they structure their narratives on a bed-to-bed framework ("I woke up at 6 a.m. . . . . and, to conclude I was ready to retire at once. 11:50 p.m. and I for one was all tired out but very well pleased"), as does this naive adult writer, despite the trivial nature of this information. Likewise, the fact that he ate breakfast is both obvious and unnecessary, since he provides no details to give it undue significance ("eels out of season, and ptarmigan eggs"). That Dodd "picked up an 8x12 dinnar" and that the locomotive cab in which he rode was numbered 753 are peripheral and irrelevant, of interest only to himself.

Twain, on the other hand, uses lists for rhetorical as well as informational purposes. He explains, of his Uncle John's farm:

> It was a heavenly place for a boy, that farm of my uncle John's. The house was a double log one, with a spacious floor (roofed in) connecting it with the kitchen. In the summer the table was set in the middle of that shady and breezy floor, and the sumptuous meals--well, it makes me cry to think of them. Fried chicken, roast pig; wild and tame turkeys, ducks, and geese; venison just killed; squirrels, rabbits, pheasants, partridges, prairie-chickens; biscuits, hot batter cakes, hot buckwheat cakes, hot "wheat bread," hot rolls, hot corn pone; fresh corn boiled on the ear, succotash, butterbeans, stringbeans, tomatoes, peas, Irish potatoes, sweet potatoes; buttermilk, sweet milk, "clabber"; watermelons, muskmelons, cantaloupes--all fresh from the garden; apple pie, peach pie, pumpkin pie, apple dumplings, peach cobbler--I can't remember the rest. (p.12)

The long list, the abundance of the food, its freshness and wholesomeness, farm grown and homemade, reinforce Twains's

thesis that the farm "was a heavenly place for a boy." The groupings of food are logical, not random or casual: domestic meat, fowl, wild game, breads--all hot--, vegetables, culminating in fruits and desserts. Although some could probably have been omitted, the large number of foods and the rhythmic cadence established by the accents on first syllables and first words, and the pauses between clusters, enhance Twain's deliberate impression of delicious sumptuousness. Everything belongs. The details are vivid, specific, sufficient to evoke the reader's experience of what such foods are like, and an appreciation for both the specific and the generic experience. "I can't remember the rest" implies more, still more, and is equivalent to the provocatively vague endings of fairy tales, "and they lived happily ever after."

Arrangement. Naive writers usually arrange autobiographical material either according to the order in which they have experienced an event (as we saw in Isaac Dodd's journey) or come to know a phenomenon, or according to the order in which they remember it. If either order addresses the readers' perspective or need to understand the material, such accommodation is accidental. For instance, naive writers almost invariably describe their houses, by walking the reader through according to a floor plan clear as a blueprint in the writer's mind, but seldom as apparent to readers unfamiliar with the actual layout. In contrast, writers of real estate ads, though scarcely producing models of exemplary prose are distinctly reader-oriented, and convey the house's significant features (style, size, unique features, age, financing) with economical hyperbole.

Likewise, Natalie Crouter's physical descriptions of the internment camp near Baguio, in the Philippines, usually emphasize the dominant impression of the scene, psychologically as well as visually:

> Our camp is lucky to have the beauty of pines, blue sky, clouds, and mountains. We could not be detained in a lovelier place. I have not been conscious of being a prisoner yet, do not notice the barbed wire, fence or guards, bayonets or guns. Even

> the machine gun trained on us for two days, covered with canvas, made little impression. For a while it was touch and go, so I no doubt should have had more fear and perhaps did, subconsciously. Most of us can walk on the path right at a soldier coming forward with bayonet held out and remain unmoved. Are we too tired or have we had too much taken away to be bothered by small things? (2/6/42, p. 19)

In Crouter's view, the camp's overwhelmingly beautiful setting suppresses the impedimenta of imprisonment, barbed wire, guards, and guns. She contrasts the beauty and the grimness of the setting, and concludes by putting the wartime dangers ("small things" such as the possibility of running into a bayonet) into an eternal perspective. The description moves from the sky to the earth, the distant to the immediate, the vast to the small, controlled and interpreted. In many individual paragraphs Crouter achieves stylistic distinction. But she was not, until the publication of this Diary forty years after she wrote it, a professional writer, and she needed the help of a professional editor not to change the words that she actually wrote, but to alter their proportioning.

Proportioning/emphasis. Proportioning determines emphasis. Naive writers too often ignore this precept that skilled

writers seem to understand intuitively (though my assumption is that they have actually learned this through repeated rewriting over the years). The development of a self-critical facility is one mark of a professional writer. This involves not only the ability to discriminate between the important and the unimportant, but a willingness to delete repetitive, redundant, or peripheral material to emphasize themes, characterizations, motifs that may emerge either during the experiences themselves or in the course of writing about them. The original version of Natalie Crouter's diary, five thousand typescript pages, emphasized her major concerns--with the monotonous daily diet, with endless arguments over personal space, with the minutes of innumerable committee meetings, with internecine wrangling over petty privileges-- in far more redundant detail than external readers would have been able to tolerate. Even though Crouter was writing for an audience, she could not detach herself sufficiently from these matters to delete anything.

But if given five-ten pages of the original typescript, student readers-turned-editors quickly develop the 20-20 vision of hindsight. Working either in groups or individually, they vigorously delete what they find boring or unnecessary, and from their texts usually emerge the same themes I, as a professional editor, emphasized in the final text of the diary that I cut down by 90%. They either stress the American values

of democracy, resourcefulness, education, social organization, and family life. Or they highlight Crouter's own values of independence, integrity, fairness, open-mindedness (she saw both Japanese and Americans as individuals, not as national stereotypes), grace under pressure, and humor:

> Little Ronnie took the mouse in a trap to the cat, opened the trap, released the little mouse, upon which the cat pounced, then Ronnie ate the bait, which was a peanut. (10/17/44)

When they've finished, we compare their edited versions with the published text, and discuss the rationale for the variations--is it better this way, or that way, or yet another way? This enables the students to develop working priciples that discriminatebetween the important and the unimportant, the interesting and the dull, the memorable and the forgettable.

Extent of interpretation. In contrast to professional writers, whose selection, arrangement of, and commentary on their material constantly interprets it, naive writers are content either to think their material is self-explanatory or to be unaware that it needs interpretation for an unfamiliar audience. Although such interpretation is not necessary solely for the author of a private diary, students can profitably examine such texts to determine what would have to be added or explained to make the material understandable to outside

readers and to make manifest its latent significance. Thus they can profitably scrutinize such bed-to-bed excerpts from the "Diary of the Michigan Farmer's Wife" as:

Sunday, September 3, 1950--12 eggs

A rainy day. Well I slept in got up at 11. dad got up. Jimmi and Fred, they got the septic tank in. took down the tent I was just getting breakfast at noon when here come Jean her three little kids. Mrs. Morris Ed I cant think of his last name and to weman picked 8 pints of raspberrys. Ed picked 1/2 of bean's gave dad $2.00. Later Cook came a young couple with him, bought 4 quarts fresh cream, Nancy baked a cake Sharon frosted it. I made two pies, Barrett Broad was here too, Nancy and Carlin went fishing. So they didn't get the ice cream. Nancy made a meat loaf it was good. Nancy gave me a Toni to-nite, we play Pinochal while Nancy was working on my hair, then Warren and Ronny came so Nancy and the two boys played Canasta, left for Alpena near 12, for hamburgers. Sharon went out this morning, its most 1:45 guess I'll go to bed too.

Here every activity receives equal emphasis and no interpretation --installing the septic tank, taking down the tent, cooking breakfast at noon, selling vegetables, making

pies . . . . More authorial interpretation would have helped to explain the significance and relative importance of some of the activities and would have enlivened a sparse narrative as well. A writer concerned with external readers might explain the significance of installing the septic tank--perhaps a transition from outdoor to indoor plumbing, and comment on the teamwork involved, or the expense. A more skilled writer would identify and characterize the people, Jimmi and Fred, Nancy and Carlin, Sharon, pointing out their relationships to one another and to the author, hinting at their motivations, placing them more fully in their social and intellectual contexts.

In contrast is the amount of interpretation that Mark Twain supplies in nine sentences about his childhood experiences with bats. He assumes that his readers don't know him and his mother and their relationship, or Hannibal, Missouri, but that they already have their own views about bats, and adjusts his details accordingly.

> I think a bat is as friendly a bird as there is. My mother was Aunt Patsy's sister and had the same wild superstitions. A bat is beautifully soft and silky; I do not kow any creature that is pleasanter to the touch or is more grateful for caressings, if offered in the right spirit. I know all about these coleoptera, because our great cave, three miles below Hannibal, was multitudinously stocked with them, and often I brought them home to amuse my mother with. It was easy to manage if it was a school day, because then I had ostensibly been to school and handn't any bats. She was not a suspicious person, but full of trust and confidence; and when I said, "There's something in my coat pocket for you," she would put her hand in. But she always took it out again, herself; I didn't have to tell her. It was remarkable, the way she couldn't learn to like private bats. The more experience she had, the more she could not change her views.

Twain begins with two overt assessments of bats--their temperament ("friendly") and their touch ("soft and silky"). His interpretive and intentionally erroneous identification of bats as "birds" and "coleoptera" is a sophisticated joke. Bats can't be both, and Twain not only counts on the readers to know that they are neither, but to recognize that he as an author knows this as well, and that he as an adult author is playing a trick on less knowledgeable readers, just as Twain the boy played a trick on his unsuspecting mother. He identifies his mother, in relationship ("Aunt Patsy's sister"--about whom Twain had just been talking), in character "not a suspicious person, but full of trust and confidence," and in actions--she never caught on to her son's tricks, and always put her hand into his pocket--to encounter a bat. He identifies the bat cave in size ("great") and location ("three miles below Hannibal"). And he characterizes himself as a child, mostly by implication. He lets the readers know that he played hookey by saying he had "ostensibly been to school" when in fact he had been to the bat cave. He shows how he tricked his mother. And he demonstrates his talent for comic understatement by allowing the child prankster and adult authorial roles to blend in his overt interpretation of his mother's invariable reaction to discovering a bat in his pocket: "It was remarkable, the way she couldn't learn to like private bats," supplying the final,

interpretive comic touch with "private"--for surely she wouldn't have liked public bats any better.

Persona. All autobiographical writings of whatever quality present personae, intentional or not. The more skilled the writer, the more numerous, varied, individualized, and complex are these personae, as the central character plays various roles at different stages of his or her life. The more skilled the writer, the greater the control over both the personae and the readers' reactions to them, as we have seen in the above example from Twain.

Authors of inartistic autobiographies, published or unpublished, are likely to let the persona emerge unwittingly from the materials, rather than shaping the evidence to reinforce a preconceived and therefore self-controlled authorial image. Indeed, a major discrepancy between the author's intended persona and the actual one is a sure sign of an amateur writer. For instance, in Wishes are Horses: Montgomery, Alabama's First Lady of the Violin, novice writer Fanny Marks Seibels claims to be devoting most of the book to demonstrating her development and supremacy as a musician. Yet, characteristic of her discussion of her attempt to establish a concert career in New York at sixteen is this passage:

> At this point my memory plays me tricks. I have

> long thought that Ethel Barrymore in Cousin Kate was the first play that I saw in New York. But no! She was not playing Cousin Kate in 1900; she was starring in Captain Jinks of the Horse Marines. And I know that I did not see her in Captain Jinks; for in September, 1902 I saw Captain Jinks (without Ethel Barrymore) in Montgomery. It was the night of the marriage of Jenny Wadsworth to Ira Virgin. I played at the wedding. Later, I went to the theatre with "Mr. Seibels." After the theatre, I stood in our hall, under our crystal light, with him; and he told my fortune. He looked at my hand and said that I had great ambition but little feeling, or emotion. He looked at my thumb and said that I had great will power but little intellect. And this from the man that I married! (p. 80)

Seibels is writing essentially for herself, secondarily for tolerant intimates, and not at all for anyone else--despite the fact that she, like many novice authors, appears to think that the entire world will find her account fascinating. She evidently intends to present the persona of a breathlessly attractive, budding sixteen-year-old violinist, but in fact she is conveying the persona of an egotist entirely preoccupied with trivia that not even an intimate friend would appreciate.

Who but Seibels would know or care when she first saw Ethel Barrymore, or Captain Jinks? Who but Seibels would mark dates by weddings at which she played? And who but an amateur author ignorant of the conventions of identifying new characters the first time they are introduced would refer to unknown people such as "Jenny Wadsworth" and "Ira Virgin" without telling who they are? The alleged violinist becomes lost amidst such irrelevant trivia.

Seibels' persona, overt and implied, does not change over time as one would expect a narrative of maturation to reveal. Seibels's account of her wedding a decade later, derived perhaps from the society pages, focuses on her dress, the music, her attendants and the fact that "My presents were elaborate; I think they were the most beautiful that any girl ever received" (p. 216). Not only does she ignore the groom, but their relationship, feelings, motivations for marriage, or expectations of her changed role. Her lack of analysis, adoption of a formulaic mode of presentation, and continual absorption with trivia ("Miss Lunt had given me the material for my dress; Miss Annie Beader made it." p. 217) unwittingly reinforce the image of a shallow, immature persona.

In contrast is Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts (1975; rpt. New York:

Vintage Books, 1977). Among its most notable features are the myriad of personae, manifestations of Kingston's selves, past, present, and future, which she has re-created and created in the process of continuing to "sort out what's just my childhood, just my imagination, just my family, just the village, just movies, just living" (p. 239). Simply by being born she acquires the persona of a Chinese girl in a dual culture, American and Chinese: "Even now China wraps double binds around my feet" (p. 57).

To assert herself and to reject the unacceptable Chinese stereotype of girls as worthless ("Better to raise geese than girls."), Kingston as a schoolgirl adopts a thoroughly unfeminine persona, almost sexless. She twists her mouth, affects a limp, speaks in a "dried-duck" voice, and wears flapping shoes (pp. 221-226). Later, as a diligent and brilliant student she adopts the role of a scholar, "I'm smart. I can do all kinds of things. I know how to get A's . . . . I can make a living and take care of myself" (p. 234). Her scholarly self enables her to metamorphose into her own person, an independent-minded adult writer, analytic, critical, and self-critical but with a sense of humor: "Even now, unless I'm happy, I burn the food when I cook. I do not feed people. I let the dirty dishes rot" (p. 56). Through the superimposed persona of the mythical Woman Warrior, a complex metaphor

brought to life, Kingston combines the multiple personae of daughter and mother, wife and warrior, rebel leader and obedient servant. Through the act and artifact of autobiography, the strong, positive persona of the Woman Warrior becomes the Woman Writer, her direct and powerful descendant.

Through comparing, analyzing, and editing parallel autobiographical texts by professional and amateur writers, students can learn how considerations of audience control authorial perspective and persona, arrangement, proportioning, emphasis, and interpretation. Such textual examinations will enable students to ask, almost routinely, such questions as:

1. Who will read this? (a concern of audience, perspective)
2. Why? What will they find interesting, significant? Why or why not? (concerns of content, emphasis, style, interpretation, possibly persona)
3. What do I need to supply or eliminate to emphasize what's interesting, important? (concerns of emphasis, proportioning, interpretation)
4. Does my overall organization reflect my intended emphasis? Does my arrangement of details, incidents? (arrangement)
5. How much overt interpretation will I need to

supply? How much is apparent from the context?
(concerns of interpretation, perspective)

6. What kind of person will the readers think I am, as a character static or changing, and as an author (concerns of persona)?

With practice, begun perhaps through rewriting some of the inept texts they have examined in class, students can learn what all professional authors discover and rediscover. They can learn the importance and impact of audience on the creation of each new text, and they can write these texts themselves.

Notes

1. Linda Flower, "Writer-Based Prose: A Cognitive Basis for Problems in Writing," College English, 41:1 (Sept. 1979), 19-37.

2. Louis Kaplan, et al, A Bibliography of American Autobiographies (Madison, Wisc.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1962).

3. Mary Louise Briscoe, Barbara Tobias, and Lynn Z. Bloom, American Autobiography: A Bibliography, 1945-1980 (Madison, Wisc.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982).

4. The Autobiography of Mark Twain, Including Chapters Now Published for the First Time, ed. Charles Neider (New York: Harper & Row, 1959).

5. In Writing Process Problems: Writer's Block, Writing Anxiety, and Writing Apprehension, ed. Mike Rose (New York: Guilford Press, 1984).